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## SPECIAL ARTICLES

# ACADEMICISM AND THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF DESIGN

By KENYON COX

(See pages 428 and 429)

**A**MONG artists however slightly tinctured with "modernism," or even with impressionism, the word "academic" has come to be used with a curious looseness but almost always as a term of reproach. With the extremists, whether among artists or writers for the press, anything which shows vestiges of what used to pass for sound drawing and painting is immediately dubbed academic, and that epithet is thought sufficient to dispose of it. That this antipathy to academicism, combined with uncertainty as to what academicism is, may be found even in the ranks of the National Academy of Design the following anecdote will testify:

A year or two ago I sat on an exhibition jury when a picture came before us which was purely naturalistic in its aim and very inefficient in execution; a picture without composition, badly drawn and badly painted, plainly the work of an untrained mind and hand. What was my surprise to hear from the man at my side the words: "Too academic."

"Academic?" said I, "I can see nothing academic in it except that it might be the work of a pupil in the Academy's schools."

"That" said he "is just what I meant."

In view of such looseness of usage it seems worth while to remind ourselves what academic art really is, and what are its virtues and shortcomings. Academic art is, primarily, art as it is taught in academies; art which conforms to all the rules and fulfils all the demands of academies; art which would justify the election of the artist to membership in an academy. Secondly, in the sense of *merely* academic, it is art which, however accomplished, shows little creative power and is without the note of original genius.

Now the things which academies have always demanded and inculcated are, first: a certain elevation of subject and of treatment; second: faultless composition according to traditional standards, derived, in the first instance, from the work of Raphael and Poussin; third: correct drawing of the human figure in which a thorough acquaintance with natural forms is controlled by an idealism founded upon classic sculpture; fourth, a competent knowledge of anatomy, perspective and other such scientific matters with which art has to deal. In matters of color, of light and shade and of technical handling academies have generally been less exigent, insisting only upon unity and sobriety of tone and upon precision of execution, but in everything they have maintained a certain standard of propriety and of sound workmanship and have discouraged all extravagance or eccentricity.

No work of art has any right to the title "academic" which is not highly accomplished according to these standards. The work of David and his best pupils was academic. The work of Cabanel and Lefébvre and Leighton was academic. Almost the only American artist who has been worthy of the title of an academic painter was Vanderlyn. Paul Baudry had all the academic virtues, but he escapes from the category of the merely academic by a genius for composition and for expressive drawing which transcends academic standards, while Ingres and Millet were as much above academicism as many of their contemporaries were below it.

Academies do not, because they cannot, inculcate or inspire creative genius; nor can they encourage it beyond recognizing its presence when it exists. This they have generally done, and in so far as they have failed of doing it they have provided the strongest weapon in the armory of their assailants. The function of an Academy and of the academic tradition is not to do the impossible by creating genius, but to do the possible by maintaining a general and high level of accomplishment, from and above which genius, when it spontaneously occurs, may rise. To fall below this level is to be negligible. And note that the characteristics of good art are insisted upon in pretty nearly their order of importance: An academic picture is elevated in conception and in treatment, is thoroughly and intelligently composed, is accurately drawn and pleasingly and appropriately colored, is correct in perspective and anatomy and soundly and competently painted. Why, then, this horror of the academic and how can a picture be *too* academic? Should we wish for pictures less elevated in conception and in treatment, less well composed and drawn, less thorough in knowledge and less competent in technic?

No, it is not possible for a picture to be too academic. What is possible is for it to be more than academic, and it is the supra-academic that we want. Touch any one of the elements of academic art with genius, and at once it is raised above the academic standard. Genius gives us not merely elevation of subject and treatment, it gives us invention of subject and imagination in treatment. It gives us not merely good composition but inspired and original design, not merely correct drawing but that highly significant drawing which forces us to reproduce the bodily sensations and, through them, the state of mind of the persons represented. Genius transforms pleasing and appropriate color into passionate or glorious color, makes poetry and mystery out of light and shade and endows even

the technical handling of material with the power of expression.

The artist who can thus transcend the academic standards in one or another part of his art, and only he, may be allowed to sink below it in some other parts. But if he fall far short of it anywhere he will be an interesting artist rather than a wholly great one.

The academic standard, then, is rather negative than positive, and is avowedly incomplete. But it is the only applicable and enforceable standard in criticism or in education. Genius is incalculable. We cannot tell when or where it will appear or how it will express itself when it does appear. The critic may pray to appreciate it, but he cannot be certain that what he takes for genius is so, or that he has not failed to see it where it exists. But, if he is properly trained, he may apply the academic standards with some assurance that he can at least weed out the negligible and the incompetent. The teacher cannot show his pupils how to transcend academic rules, but he may hope so to train them in the application of these rules that they shall not leave him as ignorant bunglers. It is especially, however, in self-development and self-measurement that the academic standards are invaluable. No one can be so uncertain whether a given artist does or does not possess genius as that artist himself, and it is none of his business to determine the question. His task is to produce the best he is capable of, according to his lights, and to leave to others the decision whether his best is or is not worth while. He cannot know whether what he is trying to say is worth saying, but he may know pretty definitely how nearly he has succeeded in learning his trade; and it is his duty to master it as completely as is possible to him, strengthening his weak points by strenuous study at the same time that he increases the effectiveness of his strong points, measuring his achievements by the only available standard, determined that he shall come as near to it as his talents will permit. If he can anywhere transcend this standard, so much the better for him and for us, but he can do it only by more study, not by less. If he have any genius its expression will be but reinforced and clarified; if he have only talent, he may at least make himself a respectable practitioner, and without creative genius he cannot make himself more.

For more than a hundred years France has had such an organized academic régime, from the Institut at the top to the École at the bottom, as has existed nowhere else. Nowhere else has such a level of accomplishment been attained; nowhere else have there been so many competent academic workmen. Is it not because of this, rather than in spite of it, that the few indubitable masters of the nineteenth century were Frenchmen, and that all the revolutionaries whose work has proved to have any permanent validity were also Frenchmen?

Yet one can understand that the mere human dislike of monotony, even if it be the monotony of excellence, should lead to a cry for something different, though the different thing should be worse rather than better. One can understand, though one may not approve, the demand for the abolition

of academic standards in a country where such standards have been more rigid and more dominating than elsewhere. But what shall we think of the constant repetition of the cry in *this* country? Why this fear of the academic in a country that has never had an Academy, this reiterated determination to throw off "shackles" that for us have never existed?

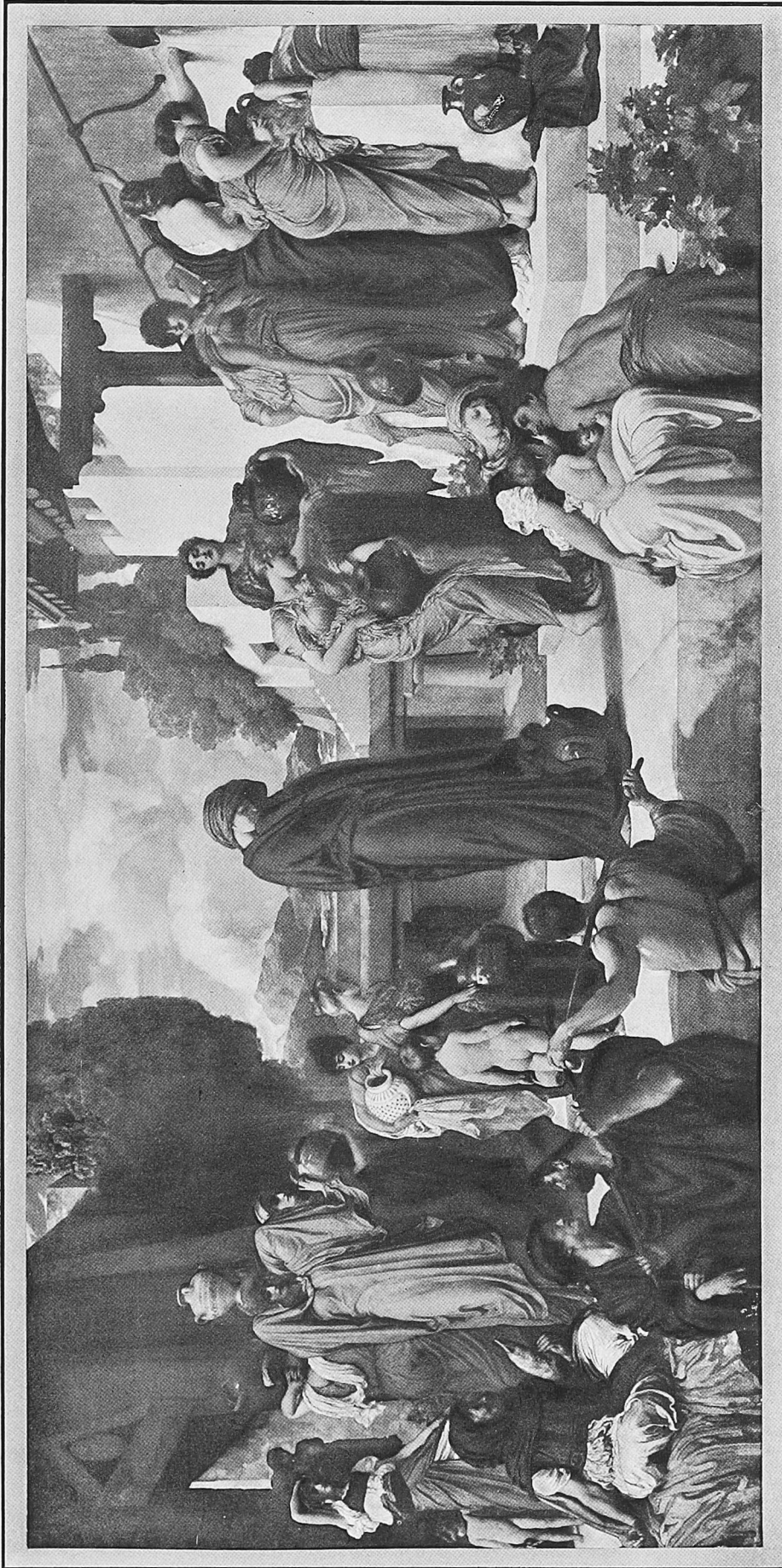
For the name of the National Academy of Design has deceived its enemies if not its friends. It is much more national than its critics will allow; but it is not in any true sense an Academy, whatever its founders may have intended it to be. It is a free society of artists organized for the purpose of holding exhibitions—a society more liberal in its elections and in its policy than almost any other. Its membership is bound together by no common principles and by no body or doctrine, and includes almost every artist in the nation who has achieved a definite reputation. It does indeed maintain schools which teach the rudiments of drawing and painting as well as, if not better than, they are taught elsewhere in America; but it has never provided anything that could be called a complete academic training or enforced a really severe academic discipline. As a professional association, fairly representative of the body of artists in this country, it is an admirable institution, but it cannot pretend to discharge the functions of an Academy in upholding traditions and maintaining a high academic standard. It does for us as well as it can, under difficulties which we may hope to see removed, that work which is performed in France by the Société des Artistes Français, and the name of the old Society of American Artists which it absorbed would suit it more perfectly than its own. It cannot do the work of the École des Beaux Arts or of the Institute of France. If the work of the latter body is to be done here at all, the American Academy of Arts and Letters will have to find the way to do it.

So far, then, is the National Academy from being a hide-bound academic body against whose authority it is necessary to keep up a constant protest that it is not half academic enough and has no authority against which to react. The danger to American art is not that of rigid conformity to fixed standards, but that of anarchic individualism, of unbridled license and of the absence of all standards. Our critics would be more wholesomely employed if, instead of constantly railing at academicism and the Academy, they were pointing out how far our art falls below the academic level and were exhorting us to attain that level before trying to rise above it.

*Kenyon Cox, N. A.*

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR ILLUSTRATIONS.

1. An Academic Picture: "Captive Andromaché" by Lord Leighton (Corporation of Manchester).
2. A Supra-academic Picture, a Work of Genius: "The Grafter" by Jean François Millet (Collection of Wm. Rockefeller).
3. An Infra-academic Picture: "Dead Christ" by Edouard Manet (Metropolitan Museum).



**"THE CAPTIVE ANDROMACHE"**

BY SIR FREDERICK LEIGHTON

An Academic Picture  
(See pages 426 and 430)



*Courtesy of Scribner's*

**"THE GRAFTER"**

BY J. F. MILLET

A Supra-Academic Picture



**"ANGELS AT THE TOMB OF CHRIST"**

BY E. MANET

An Infra-Academic Picture

(See pages 426 and 430)